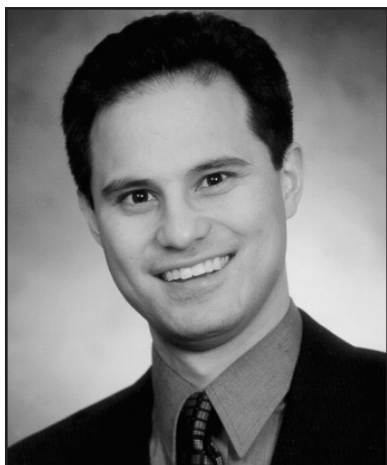




Resenting Chastity

by Edward P. Sri



Edward P. Sri is an Assistant Professor of Theology at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. He is the author of or contributor to several Emmaus Road books, including *Mystery of the Kingdom* and *Catholic for a Reason I, II, and III*. His latest book, *Queen Mother*, is based on his doctoral dissertation and is now available.

All references in this column to Pope John Paul II's *Love and Responsibility* are taken from the 1993 edition, published by Ignatius Press.

These books may be ordered from Benedictus Books. Call (888) 316-2640. CUF members receive a 10% discount.

Virtue is not something simply lacking in the modern world. It is something many in the modern world actually *resent*.

That's a point that John Paul II—then Karol Wojtyła—makes when beginning his teaching on chastity in his book *Love and Responsibility*.

Why is virtue resented by many people today? First, living the virtuous life is not easy. It requires a lot of effort, practice, and self-denial. We are constantly battling against our fallen, selfish human nature. This side of the Garden of Eden, it is a lot easier to give in to our emotions and desires than it is to control them. For example, it is easier to indulge our appetite than it is to eat with moderation. It is easier to lose our temper when things don't go our way than it is to moderate our anger. It is easier to give in to discouragement and complaining than it is to joyfully endure our trials with courage.

The virtues remind us of the higher moral standard that we are called to follow. This reminder should inspire us to give more of ourselves in the pursuit of virtue and live more like Christ, rather than living life enslaved by our passions.

However, not everyone wants to be reminded of this. For souls not wanting to give up certain pleasures or comforts—souls not wanting to do the work and make the sacrifices that are necessary to grow in virtue—any discussion of the virtues can be like a mirror showing them their own moral laziness.

Virtue Subverted

This is why some people resent the virtues. Instead of being inspired to live a better life, they destroy the moral standard of the virtues and drag it down to their level. In other words, they minimize the significance of the virtues in order to spare themselves the effort and excuse their own moral failures.

For example, imagine several women working in an office who gossip and talk about other people behind their backs. One of their Christian colleagues, however, does not use foul language and does not participate in their gossip. Instead of being inspired by her example, her co-workers make fun of her. They ridicule her as being a “holy roller” who is “too good for the rest us.” By not going along with what everyone else is doing, she stands as a reminder of their own immoral behavior. Thus her virtue is not praised. It is *resented*.

Wojtyła says that many people devalue the virtues in order to excuse themselves from having to live by a higher standard. Since they don't want to make the effort to change, they treat the virtues lightheartedly or even openly attack them in order to justify their own lack of moral character. “Resentment . . . not only distorts the features of the good but devalues that which rightly deserves respect so that man need not struggle to raise himself to the level of the true good, but can ‘light-heartedly’ recognize as good only what suits him, what is convenient and comfortable to him” (p. 144).

Resenting Chastity

The virtue that is probably resented the most today is chastity. Chastity is no longer seen as something good, something noble, something we should all pursue. Just the opposite: Chastity is now often portrayed as something evil—something *harmful* for human persons!

Some argue that chastity is harmful to the psychological well-being of young men and women. Sexual desire is natural, it is said. Therefore, it is unnatural to restrict it in any way.

Others say chastity is an enemy of love. If two people love each other, shouldn't they be able to express their love through sexual intercourse? Chastity might have a role to play in other areas of life, but when two mutually consenting adults are in love, the restrictions of chastity are a tremendous hindrance to the couple who are expressing their love through sex.

These and many other arguments against chastity reflect our culture's resentment of this virtue. We witness this resentment of chastity in many college classrooms, in many "sex ed" programs, and especially in the media. When a Hollywood film or prime time sitcom portrays romantic relationships, how often is chastity held up as a moral ideal? How often is chastity presented as something that makes us happy, as something the heroes intentionally make a priority in their lives?

Why This Resentment?

Wojtyla says the main reason modern man views chastity as an obstacle to love is that we associate love primarily with the emotions or the sexual pleasure we receive from the person of the other sex. In other words, we tend to think of love only in its *subjective* aspect. If we are going to restore the virtue of chastity in our world, "we must first of all eliminate the enormous accretion of subjectivity in our conception of love and of the happiness which it can bring to man and woman" (p. 144).

To understand this point better, let's briefly recall the two sides of love, which we considered in a previous

reflection.¹ For Wojtyla, the *subjective* aspect of love is simply a "psychological experience"—something happening inside of me. When men and women encounter each other, they may spontaneously find themselves physically attracted to each other's "good looks" (he calls this attraction sensuality). And they may also find themselves emotionally attracted to each other's masculine or feminine personality (he calls this sentimentality). These sensual desires and emotional responses are not bad. In fact, they can serve as the "raw material" from which authentic love might develop. However, these responses do not represent love itself. At this level, they remain attractions to the other person's body or their masculinity or femininity, not love for the other person himself or herself.

The *objective* aspect of love is much more than a psychological experience happening inside of me. It is "an interpersonal fact." It considers what is really happening in the relationship, not just the good feelings I experience when I'm with the other person. The objective aspect of love involves a mutual commitment of the will to what is best for the other person and the virtue to be able to help the other person pursue what is best for them. Even more, love in this fullest sense involves self-giving—a surrendering of one's will, a decision to limit one's autonomy in order to serve the other more freely.

Therefore, the real questions in love are not the subjective ones: "Do I have strong feelings and desire for my beloved? Does he or she have strong feelings and sensual desire for me?" Anyone can have feelings and desire for another person. But not everyone has the virtue and commitment to make self-giving love possible.

Sexual Values

Now back to the problem of chastity. Wojtyla points out that the subjective aspect of love develops more rapidly and is felt more intensely than the objective aspect. On the objective level, it takes a lot of time and effort to cultivate a virtuous friendship. Relationships centered on

total self-giving love and on a profound sense of responsibility for the other as a gift don't just happen spontaneously.

However, with the subjective aspect of love, it doesn't take much time and effort at all to experience sensual desire or emotional longing for a person of the opposite sex. Such reactions can happen in an instant. Furthermore, these sensual and emotional responses can be so powerful that they dominate how we view the other person. In our fallen human nature, we can tend to see persons of the opposite sex primarily through the prism of their sexual values—the values that give us emotional and sexual pleasure. As a result, we obscure our perception of them as *persons*, and view them more as opportunities for our own enjoyment (cf. p. 159).

Wojtyla points out that our encounters with the opposite sex are often mixed with this kind of emotional or sensual egoism—with a desire to use the person for our own emotional pleasure or sexual satisfaction. "The truth of original sin explains a very basic and very widespread evil—that *a human being encountering a person of the other sex does not simply and spontaneously experience 'love' but a feeling muddled by the longing to enjoy*" (p. 161, emphasis added).

Our Tendency to Use the Opposite Sex

Did you catch that? Wojtyla is saying that when we encounter someone of the opposite sex (a stranger, a friend, a coworker, a boyfriend/girlfriend, a spouse, or even another person's spouse), we should not expect a purely selfless attitude of Christian kindness to spontaneously spring from our hearts. Because we are fallen, our many complex attractions are often mixed with a selfish attitude of wanting to be with the other person *not* for the sake of any commitment to his or her well-being, but for the rush of good feelings or sensual pleasure we may receive from being with the other person. In other words,

continued on p. 49 . . .

Sri continued from p. 25 . . .

when boy meets girl, they do not automatically fall into authentic, self-giving, committed love for each other. Instead, while feeling attracted to each other, they are tempted to see each other as objects to satisfy their own emotional needs or sexual desires.

Again, these reactions to sexual values are certainly not bad in themselves. However, if we're not careful, this raw material can be used up as an outlet for our own emotional or sensual enjoyment. And as long as this happens, selfless love for the other person will never develop. That is why we need a virtue that helps us integrate our sensual and sentimental attractions with authentic love for the other as a person. Wojtyla continues, "Since sensations and actions springing from sexual reactions and the emotions connected with them tend to deprive love of its crystal clarity—a special virtue is necessary to protect its true character and objective profile. This special virtue is chastity" (p. 146).

Chastity: The Guardian of Love

Now we can see why chastity is so necessary for love. Far from something that hinders our love, chastity is what makes love possible. It protects love from falling into selfish, utilitarian attitudes and enables us to love selflessly—irrespective of the powerful emotions or sensual delight we may receive from our beloved.

If we are to truly love a person of the opposite sex, we must be able to see much more than the person's sexual

value. We must see their full value as a person and respond to them in selfless love. Wojtyla says that chastity allows us to do just that. "The essence of chastity consists in quickness to affirm the value of the person in every situation and in raising to the personal level all reactions to the value of 'the body and sex'" (p. 171).


However, the man without chastity sits in a very sad situation: He is not free to love. He may have some good intentions and a sincere desire to care for his beloved, but without chastity, his love will never flourish, for it will not be pure. It will be mixed with a tendency to view his beloved primarily in terms of her sexual values, which make his heart delight in emotional enjoyment or make his body stir in sensual desire. Wojtyla explains that the man without chastity cannot selflessly love his beloved for who she is as a person, because his heart is so preoccupied with the emotional and sensual pleasure he receives from her (p. 164).

But chastity enables a man to see clearly not just his beloved's sexual values, but even more, her value as a person. Freed from utilitarian attitudes, the chaste man is thus free to love. "Only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love. For chastity frees their association, including marital intercourse, from that tendency to use a person . . . and by so freeing it introduces into their life together and their sexual relationship a special disposition to 'loving kindness.'" (p. 171).

¹ "The Law of the Gift," *Lay Witness*, September/October '05.



Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm
Discover
Love in action.
Serving Christ in the elderly.
where
"The difference...is LOVE."sm



600 Woods Road
Germantown, NY 12526
www.carmelitesisters.com
Phone: (518) 537-5000
Email: vocationdirector@valstar.net



© Ed Sullivan Reprinted with permission from The Joyful Noiseletter (www.joyfulnoiseletter.com)

Sullivan

"You've confessed your sins with a contrite heart, Walter. Have confidence in the mercy of God."